

Chapter Title: Amber and the Ancient World

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# Introduction

## Amber and the Ancient World

The J. Paul Getty Museum collection of amber antiquities was formed between 1971 and 1984. Apart from the Roman *Head of Medusa* (figure 1), which Mr. Getty acquired as part of a larger purchase of antiquities in 1971, all the other ancient amber objects were acquired as gifts. The collection is made up primarily of pre-Roman material, but also includes a small number of Roman-period carvings, of which the *Head of Medusa* is the most important. The pre-Roman material includes a variety of jewelry elements that date from the seventh to the fourth centuries B.C.: fifty-six figured works and approximately twelve hundred nonfigured beads, fibulae, and pendants. This volume examines the fifty-six objects of pre-Roman date representing humans, animals, and fantastic creatures, plus a modern imitation. The Getty's nonfigured pre-Roman objects and the Roman works are not included in this catalogue.



**Figure 1** *Head of Medusa*, Roman, 1st–2nd century A.D. Amber, H: 5.8 cm ( $2\frac{3}{10}$  in.), W: 5.8 cm ( $2\frac{3}{10}$  in.). Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 71.AO.355.

The ambers were acquired by their donors on the international art market. The loss of any artifact's context is immeasurable, and any attempt to discuss ambers without their original context is, to borrow an analogy from Thorkild Jacobsen, "not unlike entering the world of poetry." Poetry plays a part in locating the cultural ambients in which the ambers of this catalogue once performed. In addition to ancient literary sources, the work here is examined via a large interdisciplinary toolkit, including art history, archaeology, philology, pharmacology, anthropology, ethnology, and the history of medicine, religion, and magic.

At a critical moment in writing this introduction, I read two of Roger Moorey's final contributions, his 2001 Schweich Lectures, published as *Idols of the People: Miniature Images of Clay in the Ancient Near East* (2003), and his *Catalogue of the Ancient Near Eastern Terracottas in the Ashmolean* (2004). Both were important to the final shaping of my text. (It is from the latter publication that I borrowed Jacobsen's quotation.) Certain of Moorey's observations played critical roles; among them is his cautionary note in the *Catalogue*: "Even if it may be possible to identify who or what is represented, whether it be natural or supernatural, that does not in itself resolve the question of what activity the terracotta was involved in."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, in what "activity" were these carved ambers involved? This catalogue attempts to address this question. Keeping in mind the challenges presented when working with decontextualized artifacts, I make comparisons to scientifically excavated parallels, to documented works in museums, and, with extra care, to unprovenanced material in other collections, public and private. The evidence suggests that amber was dedicated primarily to female divinities, and that most pre-Roman amber objects were buried with women and children. Individually and as a whole, the Getty Museum's amber objects are important witnesses to the larger social picture of the people who valued the material.<sup>2</sup>

My interest was first sparked by the peculiar nature of the carved amber on display in the British Museum and by Donald Strong's masterful 1966 catalogue of the material.<sup>3</sup> Strong duly noted the magical aspects of the subjects of Italian Iron Age ambers, and I took as a challenge one comment: "Many of the more enigmatic subjects among these carvings probably have a meaning that is no longer clear to us."<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

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1. Moorey 2004, p. 9.
2. White 1992, p. 560: "We have seen in the ethnographic record that material forms of representation are frequently about political authority and social distinctions. Personal ornaments, constructed of the rare, the sacred, the exotic, or the labor/skill intensive, are universally employed, indeed essential to distinguish people and peoples from each other." White's work on Paleolithic technology, the origins of material representation in Europe, and the aesthetics of Paleolithic adornment have informed this study more than any specific reference might indicate. Throughout his work, White underlines the variety, richness, and interpretive complexity of the known corpus of prehistoric representations. It is through his work that I began to understand the nonverbal aspects of adornment and to consider systems of personal ornamentation. See R. White, "Systems of Personal Ornamentation in the Early Upper Paleolithic: Methodological Challenges and New Observations," in *Rethinking the Human Revolution: New Behavioural and Biological Perspectives on the Origin and Dispersal of Modern Humans*, ed. P. Mellars et al. (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 287–302; and R. White, *Prehistoric Art: The Symbolic Journey of Humankind* (New York, 2003), p. 58, where he cites the innovative G. H. Luquet, *L'art et la religion des hommes fossiles* (Paris, 1926). In the 2007 article, White publishes the earliest known amber pendant (the amber is almost certainly from Pyrenean foreland sources), from the Archaic Aurignacian level 4c6 at Isturitz, France.
3. The watershed British Museum catalogue of carved amber by Strong was published in 1966 (Strong 1966). Since that time, there has been considerable research on amber in the ancient world and related subjects, and a significant number of amber-specific studies have been published during the last several years. These range in type from exhibition and collection catalogues, excavation reports, and in-depth studies of individual works to broader sociocultural assessments. Still, many finds and investigations (including excavation reports) await publication, and the study of amber objects is behind that of other contemporary visual arts media. There are many reasons for this lag, including the nature of the material itself. Only a small number of carved amber objects are on display in public collections; relatively few are published or even illustrated; and too few come from controlled contexts. Many important works are in private collections and remain unstudied. Moreover, under some burial conditions, and because of its chemical and physical structure, amber often suffers over time. Poorly conserved pieces are friable, difficult to conserve and sometimes even to study; they can be handled only with great care and therefore are notoriously difficult to photograph, illustrate, or display. Much more remains to be learned about amber objects from a uniform application of scientific techniques, such as neutron activation analysis, infrared spectrometry, isotope C<sup>12</sup>/C<sup>13</sup> determination, and pyrolysis mass spectrometry (PYMS), as recent research has demonstrated. For the various methods of analysis, see the addendum to this catalogue by Jeff Maish, Herant Khanjian, and Michael Schilling; also Barfod 2005; Langenheim 2003; Serpico 2000; Ross 1998; and Barfod 1996. C. W. Beck's lifetime of work on amber is indicated in the bibliographies of these publications.
4. Strong 1966, p. 11. Strong also comments: "Etruscan necklaces include a wide range of amulets of local and foreign derivation and the whole series of 'Italic' carvings consist largely of pendants worn in life as charms and in death with some apotropaic purpose. The big necklaces combined several well-known symbols of fertility, among them the ram's head, the frog, and the cowrie shell. The bulla which is common in amber was one of the best-known forms of amulet in ancient Italy." (For the bulla, see n. 152.)